

hand in unlovable hand

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/25808461) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/25808461>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	Gen , M/M
Fandom:	Minecraft (Video Game)
Relationship:	Clay Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Clay Dream & GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , GeorgeNotFound & Maia mxmtoon , Sylvee & Dream , Technoblade & Dream , GeorgeNotFound & SapNap
Character:	GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) , Clay Dream (Video Blogging RPF) , Maia mxmtoon , Dave Technoblade , Sylvee
Additional Tags:	extended cw/tw in the start note , POV Third Person Limited , a mix of historical accuracy and op's creative liberties , Dancing , Alcohol , Sharing a Bed , Sharing Clothes , Angst , Hurt/Comfort , Enemies to Friends to Lovers , Coming Out
Language:	English
Series:	Part 2 of dreaming of days of a different life
Collections:	Completed stories I've read
Stats:	Published: 2020-08-09 Words: 16815

hand in unlovable hand

by [wizardwiles](#)

Summary

“I’ll bite,” George begrudgingly agreed, “What’s your terms?”

“I get to buy you a drink,”

Without missing a beat, George retorted, “So you can get me drunk and steal everything I own for the second time?”

“You’re such an idiot,” Dream teased with surprising softness in his words, “I just want to talk to you,”

-

Western au in which George and Dream accidentally reconvene after Dream’s betrayal months prior.

Notes

I’ve returned once again to pursue the cowboy au... baller.

Thank you all so much for 300+ kudos, 40+ and 1000+ reads on part 1! Your words of praise truly inspired me to get off my ass and write part two, as well as bringing me immense joy! No joke, my nighttime routine has just become reading through every single comment on part 1 before I go to sleep. I cannot thank you all enough for your unconditional support - it means the world to me. Without further ado, here's a little list of slang words, and the extended tw/cw below (skip for spoilers).

Old west words and phrases used:

(to) bend an elbow = to drink alcohol

bunko artist = con artist

black water = weak coffee

Bait = food

Bilk = hit

Auger = big man in charge

Belvidere = a beautiful woman

(to) keep dry = to keep secret

fiddle faddle = trivial matters

boston dollar = a penny

EXTENDED TW / CW (SKIP FOR NO SPOILERS)

.
. .
. .
. .
. .

Getting drunk, smoking, armed bank robbery, gun violence, character w/ daddy issues + light discussion of daddy issues, description of bodily scars (not self h*rm), in depth description of receiving burn wounds / tending to burn wounds, internalized homophobia, outward homophobia, implied suicide (that didn't actually happen)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

I'm so sorry.

-George, not found

That was all George wrote before he slipped the note under Sapnap's door and fled *Santa Mariana* at dawn .

Deep in his subconscious, George had always planned to leave. Maybe that's why it was so easy for him that night, just to go through the motions absentmindedly - it was inevitable.

Presently, George was riding west with no idea of where he was going, the never-ending horizon in front of him and the thundering of hooves below him. He was tired, emaciated, and grossly underprepared. He had grabbed his satchel and a rosary and walked out without turning back.

After hours of aimless riding, most of which under the blistering sun, George came across a small cluster of buildings, a pathetic excuse for a town, the largest establishments in which were a bar and a morgue. Once he found a place to stow his horse, the absurdity of his present situation struck him like a bag of bricks. Somewhere in his mind, George knew he was panicking, or rather, he *should* be. He was without company in a strange town after leaving his home unannounced.

All he could think of, though, was getting a drink.

George checked his pocket watch, and it read 11:14 There was plenty of time to confront his mistakes later. When he entered the bar, all five of his senses were immediately assaulted. The air was dense with humidity and smelled strongly of cheap liquor. Rusty ceiling fans turned lazily overheads, most of the windows were shattered with bullet holes, and the wooden floors were stained with what George hoped was beer.

Among the dozens of patrons, a young woman was playing music in a corner, but George couldn't make out a word she was singing over the rowdiness of the patrons. There were a mind-numbing number of voices, quiet murmurs and loud guffaws alike, all clashing against each other in cacophony inside the small building. The only thing worse than the noise was the silence that followed as George creaked open the door.

He stood still for a moment, his soul withering away under the scrutiny of dozens of eyes, before shuffling to the furthest corner of the bar, the dull thud of his boots resonating on the wood floors. He tried his damndest to cloister himself away, to not be perceived, and after a long moment the other patrons returned to their normal ruckus.

George didn't know what he was expecting. Maybe he was hoping that he would get thrown into another fantasy of being whisked away by a kind stranger, one he could romanticize, but there was nothing romantic about this unprecedented awkwardness he felt, the visceral feeling that something is off, and that something is *him* .

The worst realization, however, was that he didn't have any money at all. George was going to have to endure this already-lackluster adventure while sober, which he anticipated to be nothing short of a headache.

In his corner, George was finally able to notice just how bizarre the patrons of this particular bar were. Across the moon, there was a man dressed solely in black and red, with a large hood casting his face in shadows. The largest table was one surrounded by at least a dozen men, all yelling at each other the card game they were playing. The most notable of the men had ram's horns protruding from his head, and he had just fired his gun into the ceiling for no apparent reason. No-one batted an eye.

George was so busy people-watching, he didn't even register that the singer had put down her instrument and was approaching him. Wordlessly, she took a seat next to George, and smiled at him warmly. She had shoulder-length hair, warm eyes, and an otherworldly beauty about her.

"This isn't your scene, is it?" She asked genuinely, with no accusation in her voice.

George fiddled with his hands uncomfortably. He didn't know where this was going, and he didn't particularly want to find out. Stiffly, he said, "No, not really,"

"Funny accent,"

"Thanks?"

"My name's Maia," She held out her hand.

Hesitantly, he shook it, "George,"

Briefly, she turned away "I suppose you could say that," George answered vaguely, "Are you?"

"I've been here a few times. Never stuck around," Maia took a sip from her glass, "What're you

doing around these parts, newcomer?"

George felt inextricably dumbfounded when posed that question. He didn't know the answer, and he couldn't think of a convincing lie or a witty retort, so he just lamely replied: "I don't know,"

"Looking for something?"

"Not really,"

"For somebody?"

Yes. "No,"

She gazed at him, her eyes inquisitive but not prying, "Then what *are* you doing here?"

"I don't know," George snapped more rudely than he intended.

Maia didn't seem phased as she took a long sip from her drink, clearly in no rush to respond. "Most folks just have it all figured it out, you know?"

"Unfortunately, I am well aware,"

"They have a plan or an idea or something. Everyone in this part of the badlands is here for a reason,"

George sighed bitterly, "I guess I'm the exception, aren't I?"

"You might wanna figure that out sooner than later," Maia quickly glanced around the room, leaned in close to George, and whispered, "I heard some people were coming to do important business. Shit's going down soon,"

George raised an eyebrow, "Why are you telling me this?"

"I don't know you, and you don't know me, but I feel like you've got a good head on your shoulders, George," She put a hand on his shoulder, "I hope you'll be able to make it out here,"

George wondered why the hell a random stranger would come up to him just to give some advice, but by the time he formed a coherent question, Maia was finishing her drink, standing up, and scooping up a few coins from the table.

Dumbly, George sputtered, "You're not staying? For the business, that is?"

"Hell no," Maia grinned good-naturedly, moving to pick up her guitar, "I play some music, and I get free drinks and a little money. These guys" - she gestured to the rest of the room "Their lifestyle isn't for me. I could never imagine living outside the law, constantly on the run, y'know?"

"Right," *I know someone like that.*

Maia gave him one final, sympathetic look. "Good luck, and goodbye," she said before exiting without another word.

George took a moment to collect his thoughts, sitting silent and alone just as he started. He didn't expect to have a conversation with a stranger, much less one like *that*, but the experience wasn't upsetting. Maia was kind, and there was a certain sisterly warmth about her that George found himself missing the moment she left.

Over the course of a half hour, the bar quieted down significantly as the number of patrons dwindled. Some lingered longer than others, but many of them were leaving in a timely fashion, as though abiding by an unspoken rule. Only a handful of people remained by the time it was nearly noon, and the room was eerily quiet. It felt like everyone was collectively holding their breath.

Distantly, a clock chimed twelve times. Once the final ring resounded, small chatter could be heard just outside the door to the bar, and then six of the strangest men George had ever laid eyes on burst through the entrance.

Leading them was a well-dressed, tall man with dark hair, and at his side, two blonde, young-looking children. Trailing them was a man with fox ears protruding from his head and another man, who was wearing a white and green striped hat. The final man was dressed head to toe in bright red, as though to display his affluence, with a ring adorning every one of his fingers. The most notable thing about the final man's appearance was the taxidermied pig head he wore, covering his head and shoulders.

The six men sat at a table in the middle of the room already stocked with drinks, poker chips, and cards, as though their arrival was expected. George idly noted there were seven chairs.

Just as the six men settled, the doors of the bar opened, revealing a seventh man dressed in a green duster with a bandana covering his nose and mouth.

Time froze as Dream and George locked eyes from across the room. Dream's expression was unreadable, yet intense. George thought he might die.

The moment soon passed, and Dream took his place at the table with the other men. Ire bubbled within George, stirring the dust of his soul and the marrow of his bones. He was relegated to a mere spectator, a fan to watch Dream play the game, drinking and schmoozing as though George wasn't sitting ten feet away. Dream didn't even look his way, not once since their initial standoff.

George noted that all the men cheated, exchanging cards from another deck and slipping in chips under the table in a desperate frenzy to get the upper hand. They spoke in hushed tones to one another, as though their words were only for the ears of the elite, not the common man. At the end, Dream seemingly won, the men all shook hands, and the original six left. The whole exchange was oddly formal, as though rehearsed.

George considered what to do. Obviously, he could leave, bolt for his horse and never look back. Part of him wanted to throw a drink in Dream's face and explain all the confusion, the *hurt* he caused him in the past few months. Another part of him wanted to pretend Dream wasn't even here, just to show how little he needed him.

It made George feel sick that he was sitting there, getting worked up over Dream's presence when he didn't even acknowledge George. He spoke to the other patrons, perfectly nonchalant. He certainly knew how to work a room - people laughed at his jokes and listened when he spoke. They were captivated by him, clinging to his every word, and Dream knew it.

Hours passed. George couldn't bring himself to confront Dream or to flee, caught between the two halves of his mind, two possibilities, breaking under the pressure.

George was halfway through convincing himself of the latter when Dream sauntered over to the bar, seating himself directly next to George as though it were nothing. He ordered whiskey for himself, insouciant as he did so.

Without turning his head, Dream said, "Hey, stranger,"

“Dream,” George choked out, his mouth dry. He stared straight forward as well, not daring to glance at the man beside him.

“Let me buy you a drink?”

“I don’t drink,”

Dream tilted his head towards the other man, ever so slightly. He looked at him from the corner of his eyes and commented, “I recall you bending an elbow the last time we were in company,”

“Yeah?” George quipped, unable to contain the acerbity festering inside him, “And I recall you stealing my horse, my gun, and most of my other belongings, and leaving me and my partner to deal with bandits in the middle of no man’s land,”

“It wasn’t personal,” Dream muttered defensively, “And if you were wondering, I sold the necklace and horse, then I bought another horse for half the price. And your gun’s mine now,”

“Isn’t that wonderful for you?” George sneered, turning to face Dream for the sole reason of making it evident he was rolling his eyes.

Dream narrowed his eyes, “If you don’t want to talk to me, then why the hell are you here?”

George laughed humorlessly at that, “You’re a presumptuous bastard, aren’t you?” He shot a look of daggers at the other man, “I didn’t come here because I *need* something from you. I didn’t even know you’d be here,”

“Then why *are* you here, George?”

I don’t know.

“Is every person in this town a busybody?” George murmured, pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration, “I don’t know, *Dream*,” - He spat out the name like it was bitter in his mouth - “but it doesn’t matter why I came here in the first place, because I’m leaving,”

“You are?” Dream queried, amusement ringing in his voice.

George stood up, shoulders back, summoning all the confidence he could, “Yes, Dream. I’m leaving,”

“If that’s so,” Dream stood with him, towering over George by several inches, “Can I give you a last bit of advice before you do? Since, you know, we *clearly* won’t be seeing each other again,”

George couldn’t describe it, but something in Dream’s tone was making him uneasy. The way he said his words that made George feel like he was missing out on a joke, “Just to be clear, I don’t need your advice-“

“Do you want it or not?”

“Make it hasty,”

Dream grabbed George by the lapels of his duster, pulling him close. George almost whipped out his pistol and put a bullet in Dream’s head right then and there for having the audacity to lay hands on him after all he did. Instead George tensed, rigid under Dream’s touch.

“Don’t wear your ostentatious, shiny sheriff’s badge in an anarchist town,” Dream advised with a low voice as he plucked the badge from George’s chest and placed it in the palm of his hand. He

took a step backwards, and clapped George on the shoulder, “Best you be on your way now. Time is of the essence, as I’m sure you know,”

George met the other man’s eyes, opened his mouth to curse him out, but closed it again. He couldn’t stand to be in his presence for a moment longer. Dream was like a hangnail or a muggy day to George; unpleasant and intolerable.

George stormed out of the establishment, making a beeline for his stowed horse. He noticed that the sun was beginning to dip below the horizon - had he really been gone for that long? Already calculating a lie to tell Sapnap, George mounted his horse, and in search of his pocket watch, reached into his pocket.

It was empty.

Ignoring the chill that spiked through his body, George checked his other pocket, then his breast pocket, his satchel, and every other feasible location on his person, but it became upsettingly apparent that George was no longer in possession of his watch. He was already at the door to the bar when he realized this fact. He glanced to where he was sitting, assuming he somehow left it, and then his eyes fell upon Dream, who was leering with diablerie written on his face.

George dug his nails into his hand to suppress his desire to punch the other man.

“You stole my goddamn pocket watch?” He accused with mordancy the second he was within earshot of Dream.

“The fact that you even had one was dumb and pretentious,”

“Give it back,” The words came out as a command, rather than a suggestion.

“On one condition,”

“I’ll bite,” George begrudgingly agreed, “What’s your terms?”

“I get to buy you a drink,”

Without missing a beat, George retorted, “So you can get me drunk and steal everything I own for the second time?”

“You’re such an idiot,” Dream teased with surprising softness in his words. He removed the unscathed pocket-watch from his breast pocket, and held it out to George, “I just want to talk to you,”

“Why does alcohol need to be involved?” George pressed further, snatching the pocket watch gingerly and slipped it into his satchel.

“It’s just a courtesy,”

“Fine. I’ll humor you,” George agreed callously, “But I’m not drinking,”

Dream shrugged as if to say *suit yourself*, and began with the small talk, “How have you been these past few months?”

“Terrible,” George intoned, “I don’t suppose you’ve taken a liking to the bible recently?”

“Sorry to say, but I’m still the same irreverent bunko artist I was when we first met,” Dream took a sip from his glass under his bandana, leaning on his elbows against the bar counter, “Remember

the bet I mentioned back then, all those months ago?”

George recoiled at the words “back then.” It made him sound familiar, like an old friend, when George considered them nothing of the sort.

“I recall, yes,”

“I won it today,” The smile was evident in Dream’s voice, he sounded as giddy as a child, “It was six of them versus one of me, and I still pulled it off. Now that pig prick owes me a shit ton of money. I reckon he’ll get it to me in a week’s time,”

George raised an eyebrow, “And what would he have won if you lost?”

“Everything I own,” Dream said casually, as though it was obvious, “Oh, and he probably would’ve killed me,”

George choked on his own tongue, “Pardon?”

“Compared to some of the guys out here, I’m a god-fearin’ zealot. I know *you* think I’m a violence-obsessed bible-hating evildoer-”

“Because you are one,”

Dream brushed off the remark and continued, “Well, *that* motherfucker is a serious loon. Before my name started circulating ‘round these parts, he and his entourage pretty much ran the place. He called himself ‘the blood god’,”

“That’s blasphemy, if I’ve ever heard it,” George muttered. It was uncomfortable to think he was in the same room with such a vile man for several hours, completely unaware.

The conversation came to a halt there, and although it wasn’t tense, it certainly wasn’t pleasant.

The sun had dipped below the horizon, golden light streaming in through the shabby windows, cascading over the steadily growing number of patrons in the bar. The groups consisted mostly of young men, but a few women were among them, including Maia. When she saw George standing next to Dream, she threw him a questioning look, and took her place on the other side of the room.

When she began playing her guitar, several couples broke into dance, drinks and cigarettes in hand. Gradually, more individuals took part, all doing the same dance, whooping and hollering with ebullience. Many of the tables and chairs had been pushed to the side of the room, leaving empty space in the centre for more people to join.

George turned to the other man, “The hell is this?”

“It’s Saturday night,” Dream said plainly as he finished his second drink, “Folks like to dance,”

George hummed in response, watching the dozens of people getting drunk and having unhinged fun, throwing away their inhibitions for the night. A part of him envied them, but a deeper, uglier part of himself resented them and their lack of composure.

“We should dance,”

The proposal felt like a slap across the face to George. Piercingly, he replied, “I don’t dance,”

“Won’t dance, won’t drink - Is there anything you *will* do?” Dream retaliated playfully.

“Is there anything you *won't* do?”

“I think you’ll find I’m open to try most things,”

Something about the way Dream said the words rattled George to his core, digging up old thoughts George had long locked away. He instead chose to focus on the spiteful competitiveness that Dream cultivated in him.

“Fine,” George simpered, “I’ll take whiskey, and I’ll dance with you,”

Dream ordered for him, and George couldn’t help but grin after the first sip, savoring the smooth, biting flavor of the amber liquid.

As George surveyed the room, he noted aloud, “There aren’t many women here,”

“And?”

“How am I supposed to dance without a proper partner?” George condescended smugly, thinking he just found his way out. *Checkmate*.

“It’s pretty common for two men to be dancing partners, since there aren’t many women ‘round these parts,” Dream replied breezily. When he noticed George’s flabbergasted expression, he added, “Did you really not know?”

“Obviously not,”

“Then you’ve got a lot to learn, *amigo*,” Dream said, rifling through his satchel. He pulled out another green bandana, moving to twine it around George’s upper arm. George jerked away, his face contorted in vexation.

“It just indicates that you’re taking the following role,” Dream explained.

“The follower?” George mumbled to himself before coming to realize what the other man meant. Indignantly, he snapped back, “Why the hell can’t *I* lead? Why don’t *you* be the woman?”

Dream huffed, annoyed, “Because you can’t lead in a two step if you’ve never done it before. Just go with it and trust me, okay?”

George glanced between the crowd of people in the bar, noticing a few of the other men had bandanas around their arms, and then to Dream’s genuine eyes. Begrudgingly, George held out his arm. The second George placed his empty glass on the table, his hand was slotted into Dream’s, and he was dragged into the centre of the room.

Dream took George’s right hand in his left, placing his own right hand on George’s shoulder blade.

“Put your left hand on my shoulder,” Dream said, but his voice was too gentle to be a command.

George complied, barely grazing the fabric of the other man’s duster as he planted his hand. He stood awkwardly, unable to think of what to say or do while Dream was peering at him like that.

Dream took a step forward, and George took a delayed step backward. Dream repeated the movement until they were slowly but smoothly moving across the room counterclockwise, similarly the other couples. George stepped on Dream’s foot on more than one occasion, but Dream just brushed it off and chuckled softly, the sound melting in the racket of the room. George would never admit it, but dancing with Dream brought him a certain lightness, an unbridled,

juvenile kind of happiness that he couldn't remember feeling recently.

Maybe I should go out more often.

At one point, George stumbled, and Dream, with his fast reflexes, caught him. They were frozen for a long moment, with Dream's hand on the small of George's back, George gripping Dream's shoulder and hand fiercely, their eyes locked.

"You okay?" Dream asked, and it was the most unfeigned George had ever heard him.

George broke away from the other man's hold, covering one hand with his mouth as he wordlessly fled to the bar, and Dream lagged behind him.

"I'm too sober for this," George grumbled before turning to the other man and instructing, "Buy me another drink,"

Dream raised a quizzical eyebrow, but complied nonetheless, ordering another drink for himself as well.

George had a second drink for the flavor. The third was for the light, dizzy feeling it gave him. George's hands were shaking too badly for him to finish the fourth.

George blinked, and suddenly it was nighttime, the bar was now only dimly lit by the lanterns scattered throughout. He pulled out his pocket watch to check the time, but the ticks on the face were blurring together, and the more he stared in an attempt to make sense of it, the more strained his vision became.

"I reckon I best be on m' way," George said, vaguely directed toward Dream.

"Are you sure about that?"

"Sure as shit," George popped the t as he got to his feet, stumbling backwards as soon as he put weight on his feet, "Fuck,"

Dream looked conflicted for a moment, contemplating what to do next. Then, he stood, placing a hand on George's shoulder, "Will you come with me?"

"Hell no," George refuted. He couldn't spend another minute with Dream - not because he disliked him, but because he was growing too fond of him too quickly. He couldn't let himself get lulled into a false sense of security.

"Please?"

Something about the look in Dream's eyes struck a chord with George. Maybe it was the alcohol, maybe it was the fondness he cloistered away, but either way, he agreed.

As they exited, George plucked Dream's hand off him and wreathed his arms around Dream's, latching onto him. Although startled at first, Dream didn't stop George, and instead guided him out of the bar, onto the street, and paused to scan the buildings. He spotted a barn at the edge of town, and began escorting George towards it.

George began to feel more sober as he drank the night air into his lungs. He nuzzled even closer to the other man, desperately trying to combat the cold night air permeating his clothes.

He absentmindedly muttered, "You're warm,"

“And *you’re* drunk,”

“Fuck, is that obvious?” - George giggled - “I don’t usually drink, ‘cause I can’t hold my liquor very well,”

“You think?” Dream teased, sarcasm thick in his voice.

“Shut up,”

After half-manhandling a very drunk George across town, the two stood at a fence surrounding a dilapidated and relatively small estate. There was a house with dark windows, animals sleeping in a large pasture, and a barn a few hundred yards away from the house. Dream jumped the fence easily and offered help to George.

“Thank you, m’lady,” George slurred, laughing to himself as he took Dream’s hand, barely managing to get over the fence without slipping, “What’re we doing?”

“Finding a place to sleep,” Dream answered in a hushed tone, leading George to the barn.

Dream and George entered the barn quietly, careful not to disturb the scattered sleeping animals. Dream gestured to the large pile of loose hay in the back of the barn, “We can sleep here tonight,”

A small part of George’s brain told him this was a bad idea, that he should turn and run from Dream, the man who betrayed him with no hesitation, and leave forever. However, drunk George craved to see where this was going to go, and was in desperate need of a nap.

Too tired and too limpid to think of a refute, George flopped onto the hay, sinking into the scratchy depths, his eyelids already feeling heavy. Dream took off his own duster, wearing only a button-up underneath.

George would never admit it, but when Dream pulled off his gloves with his teeth, he felt a twist in his stomach.

“Dream?” George muttered, his words blending together, “D’you wanna know something?”

“You should probably wait to tell me until you’re sober,”

Don’t tell me what to do.

“No, no, no, ‘s fine,” George brushed him off, “You know why I wanted the - the fuckin’ thing - the, uh, the pocket watch so bad? Like, why I was so fuckin’ pissed when you took it?”

“No idea,”

George closed his eyes and yawned, speaking so quietly he was almost inaudible, “It was the only gift my father ever gave me,”

After that, George passed out. Dream stayed awake for several hours.

George was the first to wake up, but he seriously considered knocking himself out with his gun the moment he gained consciousness. It felt as though his skull was squeezing his brain, his temples thundering as blood pulsed under the skin. Moving into a sitting position sent a spike of nausea straight to his stomach.

He looked over to find Dream dead asleep, a sight which surprised George to say the least. He assumed Dream would’ve abandoned him by now, but there he was, sprawled in the hay a few

measly feet away with his bandana still covering his face. For a moment, George considered removing it, but killed the thought almost instantly. That'd be a breach of privacy, to say the least, and Dream *had* been rather kind to him yesterday. Now, he looked peaceful. His eyes were void of their usual intensity.

Not peaceful enough to not disturb, though.

"Dream. Dreeeeaaaaaam," George whined, desperately rubbing his own temples, "Dream, please wake up,"

He stirred slowly, his arms stretching upward. George ignored his shirt that was riding up, exposing some of his stomach.

"The hell do you want?"

"I feel like rubbish," George complained. It was true, his saliva felt sticky and thick in his mouth, his neck had a strange stiffness in it, and his headache only worsened every second he was awake. "What day is it?"

Dream sat up, some stray tufts of hay stuck in his dirty blonde hair, "Shit if I know. Sunday, I think?"

George's eyes shot open, his blood running cold, "Sunday?" He whispered in disbelief, "Lord have mercy, I missed church,"

"And?" Dream replied, already taking out tobacco and a small sheet of paper from his satchel, "I miss church every week,"

"I know *that* ," George snapped, standing to his feet, ignoring the wave of dizziness that overcame him, "This is the first time I've missed church in a decade. And it's all because of..." His eyes landed on Dream, who was innocently lighting the end of his cigarette with a match.

"Don't blame me for your poor decision making,"

George made a show of rolling his eyes, too hungover to think of a clever quip. He walked all of about three steps before stumbling disastrously, almost falling flat on his ass. Dream stood hurriedly, reaching for George's arm.

"I don't need you to dote on me," George growled, batting the other man away.

Dream backed off, hands raised defensively, "Let's go outside. I'll make you coffee. It won't be any black water shit, either, I'll put on a good pot,"

George trudged outside, wordlessly accepting his offer. Dream started a fire and placed a small pot of water over it. He then retrieved two mismatched cups, and set them aside.

"You got drunk as hell last night," Dream commented, extending his arm, offering George the cigarette, "You probably need this more than me,"

Without speaking, George slipped the cigarette between his fingers, and inhaled deeply. The smell and flavor of tobacco were achingly familiar.

"Are you hungry?" - When George glared, Dream clarified - "I'm not doting, Jesus Christ, I'm just being nice,"

“Yes, I suppose I’m hungry,” George responded, the words strained.

“Figures. Prissy folks-”

“ *Prissy* ?”

“Prissy folks,” Dream continued pointedly, pouring the two cups of coffee, “such as yourself aren’t good at bein’ hungry. Can’t go a damn day without bait. Don’t suppose you have any money?”

“None,” George answered into his cup as he gulped down the coffee, relishing the bitterness of it and the sobriety it brought him.

“Shit. There should be a town a mile or so north, I say we go,”

“Why do we have to go to another town for food?”

“I don’t feel like causing trouble in this one,” Dream answered unconcernedly.

George choked, “We - you’re going to be-?-” He paused, taking a moment to collect himself - “I can’t believe you’re dragging me into your outlaw lifestyle,”

Dream’s eyes widened at the accusation. “If you don’t want to assist me in my business-”

“Your *crime* ,” George interjected.

“If you don’t want to help, that’s fine, but you’re on your own,”

“That’s hardly fair, is it? You’re forcing me to abet your criminal activity just for some food,” George sneered, “I *am* an officer of the law, you know,”

Dream set his jaw at that, his tone sharp as he retorted, “I’m not ‘forcing’ you to do jack shit. We don’t owe each other anything. If you want to scurry back to your piss-poor little town in the middle of nowhere, that’s your choice,” Dream took a long sip from his coffee before adding, “Also, I know you didn’t consider this, but I’d have money for food if *somebody* didn’t run me dry to fund their alcoholic tendencies,”

“If you couldn’t afford it, you should’ve told me to stop!” George practically squawked, exasperated and irked.

Dream hesitated before speaking, and then his voice was filled with an unusual benignity as he said, “I thought if I did, you’d leave,”

George silently sipped his coffee at that. He didn’t know how to answer, nor did he want to.

“Are you with me or not?”

George took a long drag from his cigarette, staring directly into the other man’s eyes, green on brown.

I’m not ready to go home. Not yet.

Half an hour later, George saddled and mounted his horse, ready to ride to another uncharted town with Dream at his side.

The breeze on his face and coffee settling in his stomach helped to sober George while they rode. Before he knew it, they arrived in a sizable town where the buildings were maintained better and

the citizens looked cleaner. The two men trotted down the dirt road, until they paused a few buildings down from a bank.

“We’ve actually come into quite a bit of luck, believe it or not. Since it’s Sunday, things are goin’ to be a bit slower,” Dream slipped off his horse, guiding it through an alleyway the bank shared. George did the same, “Here’s the plan, you’re going to go into the bank-”

“We’re committing robbery?” George cried, incredulous, “I thought we were going to be, like, pick-pocketing!”

“And you were okay with compromising your morals for that?”

“It’s different from *robbing* a goddamn-”

“Do you mind?” Dream interrupted, his voice barely above a whisper, “And yes, we’re going to rob a bank. I’m afraid pick-pocketing won’t cut it. The money we get from this could last for weeks. And don’t worry, it’s not that hard,”

“Not that hard?” George repeated, too absorbed in his own disbelief to form a proper response. Twenty-four hours ago, he would’ve rather died than miss church services to commit armed robbery.

“Bank tellers are pussies. It’s easy in and out,” Dream explained, guiding his horse to the back of the building, “Basically, you’ll make small talk for a few minutes, then I’m going to come in, threaten the teller with guns ablazin’, you know, the whole nine yards. The teller will give me the money, I’ll run out and wait at the back of the building with our two horses. You’ll pretend to be afraid, run out a few seconds later, then we escape,”

“Sounds awfully convenient. What if the teller has a gun?”

Dream waved a hand dismissively, “Won’t have time to pull it out if I’m already aiming,”

“And if we get caught?”

“Can’t get caught if we make an expeditious retreat,”

“And what about my reputation?” George asked pointedly.

“First of all, we’re a good ways away from *Santa Maria* -”

“*Santa Mariana* ,”

“Whatever. Point is, nobody’s going to recognize you. Second of all, I’m the one committing the crime. Think of it as though you’re just any average man who happened to get wrapped up in the whole ordeal. Got it?”

“Sure,” George agreed, convincing himself that this totally wasn’t a big deal, that it’s just one, little bank robbery.

It’s not a big deal at all.

Dream put a hand on George’s shoulder, “If you really don’t want to-”

“I’m fine,” George huffed, swatting Dream’s hand away and making his way for the entrance of the bank.

Glancing through the window, George observed that it was completely empty inside, save for one teller, a young woman, behind the counter. He took a deep breath, and pushed open the door. The woman greeted him warmly, and George felt a twist of guilt knowing what was to come.

He lied off the cuff, claiming he had just moved to this town and was looking to make a deposit. He lied about his name. He lied about his age. He lied about where he came from. The lies rolled off his tongue with such ease, it frightened George, but only because he didn't realize he'd had time to practice - he'd been lying to himself for twenty-two years, after all.

George was so engrossed in his false narrative, he was genuinely caught off guard when Dream kicked open the doors to the bank, his revolver trained on the clerk.

"Unless you want a bullet in your skull, give me all the fucking money you've got," Dream bellowed, his voice unwavering. When the teller glanced below the counter, slowly moving her hand, Dream threatened her again, "You'll meet god before you can touch the trigger,"

Deep down, George was aware he wasn't in any real danger, yet nonetheless, cold panic struck him. It was probably a combination of his surprise and the fact that Dream was a little too good at playing the part; he was just audacious and ardent. His words were steady, and he held the gun like it belonged in his hand.

The woman froze, presumably stricken in fear, with her hands raised. Dream waited a few seconds, the room unbearably tense as the three individuals glanced between one another.

What George didn't expect was to feel Dream yanking him back by his collar, followed by the cool metal of the gun pressed against his head. George almost whipped around, prepared to cursed Dream out and ask if him if he was out of his *goddamn mind*. Dream looked at George through his peripherals and quirked his eyebrows, a gesture of comfort so inconspicuous George almost missed it.

He fired a warning shot at the woman, narrowly missing her head, but she didn't yield.

"Unless you'd like to spend the better part of the afternoon scrubbing blood of these here floors," Dream enjoined, "I suggest you make haste,"

He punctuated his threat by pressing down on the hammer of the revolver, the sickening click of the cylinder turning resounding through the room. With shaking hands, the teller reached under the counter and placed ten dollars on the table.

Dream released George and sauntered to the counter, gun raised. He glared at her skeptically. "Ten dollars? Bullshit. I know you have more money than that,"

She nodded slowly, then placed five more dollars atop the counter. Dream snatched the money, walked towards the door backwards, shoulders facing the teller.

"*Adios*," He called out, the smile evident in his voice, before he slipped through the door, darting for the back of the building.

George and the teller both let out a breath they didn't know they were holding, glancing at each other awkwardly.

"The Man in Green, huh?" George said aimlessly, cringing at himself as the words left his mouth. *That's kind of a corny name for an infamous outlaw.* "I should probably go,"

George stumbled out of the building, sprinting to the back once out of sight. He mounted his horse

as quickly as possible, his heart pounding and his hands shaking.

“The fuck were you doing? I don’t think that was an ideal time to go courtin-”

“Oh, piss off,” George giped, his words absent of any bite. He flicked his wrist, snapping the reins, Dream following close behind.

The cold wind billowed through George’s duster, the long fabric whipping wildly behind him as he . He could barely keep his eyes open because of how fast he was riding. His whole body was trembling, but he wasn’t anxious - far from it. He couldn’t recall a time he felt this exhilarated, this feverish, and best of all, he got to share the experience with a comrade.

Before he realized what was happening, George was laughing despite having no air in his heaving lungs, the jolly sound swept away by the wind. He could’ve sworn he heard Dream doing the same, right beside him.

They only stopped when their steeds tired out, unable to run another step. George slipped off his horse with rubbery legs, dizzy from his own adrenaline. Not bothering to hide his toothy grin, he looked over to Dream.

His body moving before his mind, George wrapped his arms around Dream, and with no hesitation, Dream embraced him back, wrapping his strong arms around George and lifting him a few inches off the ground. They ended up toppling over, landing flat on their asses, but they were too thrilled to care about getting dirty or bruised.

“Oh my god,” George finally said, laying on the dirt ground, staring at the sky, “I can’t believe we just did that,”

“I’m more surprised you didn’t pussy out,” Dream teased, propping himself up on his elbow, “I thought for sure you were going to bilk me back there,”

George rolled his eyes, “I think you’re vastly overestimating how comfortable I was in that situation. I thought you were really going to shoot me for a second there,”

Dream looked disconcerted at that, “I didn’t want to actually hurt you. I hope you know that,”

George squeezed his eyes shut, ignoring the warmth flooding to his face, “Shit, Dream, where are we gonna go now?”

Dream sat cross-legged, rifled through his satchel, and pulled out a worn-looking map. He murmured to himself as he traced his finger on the crinkled paper, his eyes jumping around wildly.

Once he looked satisfied, he looked over to George, eyes sparkling, and said, “If I’m not mistaken, an old friend of mine lives around here. If we make good time, we should be able to reach her before nightfall,” Dream quickly added, “Assuming you want to come with, that is,”

George gave Dream a confused look, “Why wouldn’t I?”

“ *Santa Mariana*, ” Dream reminded him lightly.

“Oh,” George grew flustered, because how could he forget his own home town? He was so absorbed in his adventure, his fantasy, he had forgotten what he was running from in the first place.

After a long beat of silence, George said, “I think it’s fine if I’m gone for a few more days.

Besides, *Santa Mariana* has two sheriffs for a reason..."

Any trace of guilt George had felt dissipated the moment Dream grabbed his hand, pulling George to his feet. There was eagerness and excitement glimmering in his eyes, and George knew Dream was smiling underneath his bandana.

"This is an old friend of mine, and I know she's going to love you,"

She.

That one pronoun sent George reeling for hours.

He tried to ignore the tidal wave of thoughts his brain threw at him, but the task became impossible. He spent the better part of a multi-hour journey contemplating the connotations of the phrase 'old friend' and what Dream even considered a friend. It wouldn't be surprising if Dream had taken a lover in the past few months, or if he had one in the past. Perhaps it would even be good, George assured himself, as it would allow him to avoid a decidedly awkward conversation with Dream later on.

At nightfall, they came across a series of mountains, looming in front of them like an impenetrable wall. George assumed Dream majorly fucked up the navigation, and he was preparing to quip that they were completely lost. A dark part of him wondered if Dream was going to kill him, leaving his corpse for the vultures, or better yet, leave him alive to fend off the coyotes.

Nevertheless, Dream led George to a beaten dirt path, and began the upward climb. When they reached the summit, the sun's final rays were peaking over the horizon, golden strands of light weaving through the dozens of peaks. George noticed a small house in the centre of a vast flatlands, which was surrounded on all sides with mountains.

"There she is," Dream said, leading George on the downward path.

They waded through waist-height tall grass, smothered in eerie silence. When they reached the house, it looked even smaller in person. It was a modest cottage made of wood planks with nothing particularly noticeable about the exterior. Light emitted from the windows, but there was otherwise no other indication of life from within.

Dream handed the reins of his horse to George, "I haven't seen her in a few years, so, uh, it's probably best if I talk to her first,"

George swallowed thickly, his throat feeling strained, "Right,"

"Her name is Sylvee, by the way,"

"Sylvee?" George repeated dubiously, "Do any of your friends have normal names?"

"As if you're one to talk, your best friend is named Sapnap,"

Hearing the name sent a pang of guilt through George, guilt that he really didn't want to process at that moment. He silently watched, feeling like an anachronism as Dream turned away, walking up the gravel path with his back squarely facing George. Dream raised his hand, lowered it, and raised it again, his knuckles rapping dully on the door.

A young woman wearing a dress and apron, presumably Sylvee, answered with a shotgun in hand, but she was too far away for George to distinguish any other features. George watched as Dream pulled down his bandana, as the woman clapped a hand to her mouth and discarded the shotgun in

a rapid moment of recognition.

The pebble of jealousy in George's stomach turned into a rock, and he barely managed to suppress a retch as he heard Dream say, barely audible from so far away, "I miss you, I love you, how are you?"

She saw his face. He said 'I love you'.

Sylvee opened her mouth to speak, but the direction of her gaze drifted slightly past Dream, landing on George. Dream, in a swift motion, pulled his bandana back over his nose and mouth and motioned for George to join them.

As George approached, the first thing he noticed was that Sylvee was rather beautiful, with light brown hair and summery eyes. With a bright expression, she greeted, "My name's Sylvee,"

George shook her hand and replied with his own name. The three of them stood in silence, after that, each individual waiting for the other two to say something.

"I'll, uh, go retire the horses for the night," Dream announced and tipped his hat, "George, Sylvee, why don't you two get acquainted?"

George removed his own hat and duster as Sylvee led him inside to what was ostensibly a hobbit hole - the interior of her house could best be described as cramped, yet homey. The living room was decorated wall-to-wall with trinkets and tchotchkes. A hand-knit rug that George could only assume was pink adorned the wooden floor. There was a mini kitchen on the opposite end of the room, separated from the living room by a countertop.

Sylvee motioned for George to sit across from her at a table with intricate carvings. "So George," She started, "How do you know Dream?"

"He committed a crime in my town, and I tried to kill him,"

Sylvee laughed affectionately, "Oh, yeah, he can be like that, huh? He's always lived life on the wild side,"

"Right," George swallowed thickly, "So, uh, how do *you* know Dream?"

"He's an old friend of mine, we go way back,"

"So I've heard," George said, trying not to sound bitter, "Excuse my terrible bluntness, Miss Sylvee, but, um, are you his, uh, are you and Dream-?"

"Heavens, no," She interrupted, not offended but rather surprised at the implication, "Are you?"

Heat bloomed across George's face and neck, and he knew he was blushing ferociously. He barely managed to reply, "Hell no," through his mortification.

Dream walked in through the door at that exact moment, looked to Sylvee, and asked, "Apologies for the impoliteness, but can we stay the night? George and I can lodge together,"

Sylvee threw George a questioning glance before nodding to Dream, leading them down a short hallway to a small guest room, inside of which was only a dresser, a window, and one bed.

"We can talk more tomorrow. You two probably need your rest,"

"Thanks again, Sylvee, you're the best," Dream said, with palpable fondness in his voice.

She smiled and said, "I know," before disappearing down the hallway, abandoning George and Dream alone in the room.

"What the hell was that?" George snapped at Dream the moment Sylvee was out of earshot.

Dream slipped off his duster, throwing it over the edge of the headboard, "What do you mean?"

"Don't you think it a little improper that we're - we're," George could barely speak with how flustered he felt, "We're sleeping together? That's really only something married men and women should be doing, but I suppose I'd expect nothing less from an irreverent, sacrilege-loving - what the *hell* are you doing?"

George covered his eyes with his hands, whipping away from Dream the second he began unbuttoning his shirt.

"I'm undressing?" Dream said like it was obvious, "I think it'd be terribly ungentle to track dirt and debris into Sylvee's clean sheets, no?"

"I can't believe this," George muttered to himself, ignoring the red-hot fire blazing across his skin.

"If it bothers you so bad, then sleep on the floor," Dream blustered in annoyance.

George let out a sound of frustration, whirling around to face the other man, "Why don't *you* -?"

His vocal cords drew taut when he laid eyes on Dream's shirtless upper torso, but it wasn't because of the fact Dream was shirtless - it was because of the scars that littered his body, the splotchy burn scar on his shoulder, and most notably, the mangled flesh of a scar that embellished his right side.

"George?"

"Did I do that?" George asked quietly, the sound coming out muffled from behind his hand. His words were strained. His throat felt tight.

"Oh, this?" Dream ran his fingers over the wound, "Yeah. It got infected a week after you shot me. I almost, um, died," - he laughed somberly - "It was pretty gruesome, not gonna lie. I guess I got what was comin' to me, huh?"

"I didn't mean to hit you,"

"I know,"

"Dream," George said, the word coming out of his mouth weirdly. He didn't know what to say to reconcile the fact he almost killed a man. He didn't know if there was anything he *could* say.

"There's no point in feeling bad about it now," Dream tried to comfort George, he sounded exasperated, "I did a shitty thing, you did a shitty thing, and now we do shitty things together. It's fine,"

Now we do shitty things together.

Amazingly, that didn't make George feel any better.

George felt as though his mind was distant from his body, like he was watching himself from third person. He slept in the clothes he wore for the past two days, nearly falling off the bed with how close he laid on the edge. He desperately tried to avoid Dream's warmth that radiated from under their shared blanket, and how that made him feel.

"Do you steal often?" George stared blankly at the dark splotches on the bedroom wallpaper.

"I steal from those who deserve it," Dream grumbled in reply, sleep soaking his voice.

"The people who put their money in a bank deserve it?"

Dream sighed, "Technically, the money we stole didn't belong to anybody. All banks keep, like, a few dollars under the counter in case people try to rob them. It's just something they're prepared for,"

"I don't think that's a justification,"

"George," Dream said, and the use of his first name startled him, "I know you've probably lived in *Santa Mariana* your whole life. You probably know every person in that town by their first and last name. You're used to going to church on Sundays. You're used to going to sleep and waking up at the same time. You're used to living your easy, simple life, where you're the real fat cat in town, the auger of the whole place. You'd give a thirteen year old boy a slap on the wrist for cheating, he's learned his lesson, then you go about your business as usual, and everything returns to normal. But out here? It's more complicated than that,"

"I know that,"

"Do you?" Dream asked, but it sounded more like an objection.

George didn't respond. Instead, he stared at the wall until his eyes grew dry, bloodshot.

"Good night, Dream,"

He didn't expect Dream to shift, place a hand on George's shoulder and mumble, "G'night, George," before turning over again.

The gesture cast any semblance of George's logical thinking into a messy inferno of raw emotion, leaving him to sort through a cluster of calamities most people would consider their thoughts.

When George awoke, he noticed that he was no longer on the edge of the bed, and his head wasn't on his pillow, but rather placed squarely on Dream's chest, his arm strewn over the other man's stomach. Dream's hand was fixed on the small of George's back, his fingers just barely grazing the skin where George's shirt hiked up.

It took all George's willpower to bite back a scream.

George's skin was warm, but his blood ran ice cold through his veins. His thoughts were fragmented and scattered to the edges of his logical thinking - he was overtaken by abject humiliation.

Either by coincidence or some cruel twist of fate, Dream began stirring below George, shifting his hand off of George's back. It was too late to move away and pretend this never happened, Dream was certainly in the know at this point. *I'm never going to live this down, am I?*

"George?"

The raspy timbre of Dream's voice sent an electric shock to George's brain, once again decimating any semblance of cohesive cognitive function. Naturally, George closed his eyes, and pretended to still be asleep.

Dream laid there for a moment before, with the utmost care, sliding out from under George, stepping out of bed, and pulling the blankets over his shoulders. The worst part wasn't that Dream left - the worst part was that George missed him, undeniably. His heart began to ache dully in his chest the moment Dream wasn't beside him. The bed felt too wide now, too empty.

George watched with one eye open as Dream got dressed in his usual clothes (save for the chaps), his motions languid and overly cautious. George snapped his eyes shut again when Dream began carding his hands through his own hair, attempting to tame his unkempt bedhead. Something about the whole scene felt inextricably and disgustingly intimate to George, even if he was only viewing, not participating.

Then, Dream opened the door, cringing as the hinges creaked loudly, and crept out of the room, leaving George to drown in cold sheets and his own inhibitions.

Dream's voice and Sylvee's could be heard through the walls, a stream of muffled chattering followed by intervals of laughter. George listened intently, even getting out of bed to press his ear to the wall, desperate to discern, but the attempt was futile. Just as he was about to give up entirely, George heard one word, clear as day come from Dream's mouth: George.

He needed to know the topic of their conversation and why *he* was mentioned, but he couldn't make himself known - they'd simply change the subject. Contemplating this, George threw on his vest and the duster slung over the headboard with frantic motions, not even bothering to tuck in his shirt. George never considered himself to be a slimy or deceitful individual, but desperate times call for desperate measures.

Holding his breath, George skulked into the hall, the other two's voices growing more lucid with every tentative step.

"... think he knows?"

"No, he's an idiot," Dream said, though his words lacked malice, "Sometimes I think he couldn't teach a hun to cluck,"

George rolled his eyes, Sylvee didn't respond, and Dream kept talking, "Not to mention, he's so jumpy,"

"I noticed that. He has those big doe eyes, you know?"

'Big doe eyes?' Surely, Dream is going to refute-

"I know, right? I think it's kind of pretty, though,"

George's heart stuttered in his chest, nearly stopping entirely. He shuffled a bit closer to the end of the hallway, his curiosity taking over.

Sylvee chuckled, "He's 'kind of pretty?' Since when are you one to fawn over someone? Do you think he's some sort of belvidere?"

"I mean, maybe," Dream sounded defensive, "Your words, not mine,"

"Is he a bachelor?"

"I hope so,"

"Christ, you've gone soft!"

“Fuck you, fuck off, Sylvee. Just because I-” Dream snapped his mouth shut, cutting himself off. There was a rustle of fabric before Dream cleared his throat, saying, “George?” loudly into the room.

A deluge of dread inundated George’s bloodstream as he stepped away from the wall, realizing Dream saw the coattails of the duster George was wearing. Mortified, George turned to face them, forcing an innocent smile.

“Good morning?”

The taken-aback look in Dream’s expression melted into smugness as he looked George up and down. Even Sylvee suppressed a giggle.

“Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?” Dream mused, most likely smirking under his bandana.

George looked daggers at the other man, the two staring at one another from across the room, “The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“George,” Sylvee chimed in, “Your duster...”

George looked down at himself, realizing that the clothes he were wearing were far too yellow in color to be his, and secondly, that his actual duster was located on the other side of the living room, where he left it hung up last night.

George was wearing Dream’s clothes.

In the span of a few seconds, George made three separate plans of action. Firstly, he could tear the garment from his body and admit to his mistake. Secondly, he could put his pistol to good use and commit a double homicide-suicide, erasing his cruel mistake from the Earth. Or lastly, he could pretend, despite the terrible redness in his cheeks, that this was an intentional decision.

George mustered every last drop of his confidence, sauntered over to the table, took a seat directly next to Dream, and said, “What of it?”

Dream shifted in his seat, his knee brushing against George’s under the table. Neither moved away, and when Dream leered at him, George held his gaze unflinchingly. Sylvee, who had been spectating the exchange, stood from the table and began fiddling with various cups and pots in the kitchen.

“Sylvee, let me help,” Dream protested, already moving to stand.

“You’re a guest here, Dream,” Sylvee protested, motioning for him to sit down, “Would you prefer coffee or tea?”

Dream glanced at George out of the corner of his eye, “I like both,” - He paused - “But I’ll take tea,”

“And you, George?”

“Coffee,” He intoned, not sure what to make of Dream’s gesture, how to respond, or if he was even supposed to.

The rest of the morning was pleasant, they had a breakfast of hard biscuits and dried fruit, and the conversation was agreeable, and everything was *fine*. George mostly just watched as Dream and Sylvee recounted stories from their years apart, though they both made efforts to include him in

their conversation. Eventually, Sylvee had to tend to her crops, leaving George and Dream to do as they pleased.

That's how the two men ended up in strangers' clothes, under a tree at high noon, George watching his friend scrub their clothes against a washing board. Crickets hummed distantly, the sun's tendrils of heat swathed them, and the grass curled around their ankles.

"Pretty convenient that Sylvee had another set of mens' clothes, huh?"

"Too bad it's as hot as the ninth goddamn circle," George whined, rolling his jeans to mid-calf.

Dream rolled his eyes unsympathetically, "Y'know, this would go by faster if we both did it. Sylvee has an extra washing board,"

"Tough shit, but I'm not going to help. It's women's work,"

Dream raised an eyebrow, "Is that so?"

"Yep," George responded, popping the *p*.

Dream paused as though he was going to retaliate, but shook his head and returned to his task.

"So, Dream," George began, "Why do you cover your face?"

"Why should I tell you that?"

"We're friends, aren't we?" George pressed him further, "What if we make a deal - you're into that sort of thing, aren't you?"

"This is stupid, George,"

"What if you tell me why you don't show your face, and I'll tell you a dark secret of mine? Whatever you say, I'll keep dry, and vice versa,"

"You'll be honest?"

George's mouth split into a smile, "Would I lie to you?"

"Probably, yes," Dream teased. The amusement faded from his eyes as he faltered slightly, "But, uh, I cover my face primarily for practical reasons. Anonymity is useful out there, you know?"

"That's all?" George questioned in disbelief, crossing one leg over the other.

Dream shifted uncomfortably, "I also just don't particularly want any random stranger to see my face," George paused, as though waiting for elaboration, which he received none. Finally, Dream said, "Your turn,"

George sighed, putting his chin on his hand, and leaning on his knee, "I have a... complicated relationship with my parents," His expression hardened and his voice grew somber, "I resent my father,"

Dream deadpanned, "I never would've guessed,"

"You're such an ass," George picked up a small rock and threw it at the other man, who merely laughed.

“So, what’d your old man ever do to you? Were you served food on a silver platter instead of gold?”

“Well, he didn’t exactly want a bastard for a son,” George grimaced, his words acetous on his tongue, “But I suppose life is funny like that, huh? Never giving us what we want,”

George stared at Dream as he said the last sentence. The conversation ended there.

Dream and George stayed with Sylvee for another few days, a period of time that proved to be an enjoyable lull in the normal fast pace of their everyday lives. Sylvee gave them extra food and coffee beans when they left, and Dream said he loved her again when they departed. George pretended his heart didn’t clench with the coils of envy .

When they were past the mountains enclosing Sylvee’s house, George asked the other man, “Where are we off to?”

“It’s been a week since I won the bet,” - George knew Dream was grinning under his bandana - “I’ve got business to attend to,”

They rode all day, taking the occasional break for their horses to rest, but were otherwise on the move from sunrise to sunset. When they reached the outskirts of the anarchist town, the sky was plastered with brilliance, golden light painting the buildings. It felt like George was last there so long ago, he couldn’t believe it had only been a week.

“Wait out here,” Dream commanded the other man, handing him the reins to his horse.

George frowned at that, dismounting his own horse, “I want to come with,”

“I told you, I’m doin’ business,”

“And I can’t join you?” George narrowed his eyes in obstinacy.

Dream hesitated, “It’s not something I want you to involve yourself in,”

“Because I can’t hack it?”

“Because I don’t want you to get hurt,”

The words fell flat in the air, hanging like a dead man between them.

“I,” George’s tongue suddenly felt heavy, unwieldy in his mouth as he spoke, “I’m coming with,”

“If you insist,” Dream held out his second revolver and a blue bandana to the other man, “And you didn’t hear it from me, but the pig-headed prince is actually named Techno,”

George took it, unable to suppress a smile as he covered his face and slid his hand into the gun, the weight and grip familiar.

“Techno?” George repeated, the word foreign on his tongue, “I’ve never heard that word before,”

“No one has. Legend has it he heard it from a seraph, and that he speaks in tongues,”

George scoffed at the ridiculous notion, and followed Dream into the streets. The town was empty, aside from a few distant onlookers, one of whom Maia. She looked surprised to see him again, but she gave a slight nod of approval in his direction, a gesture that reminded George of her sisterly kindness.

In the centre of the main dirt road, there stood the same six men Dream played poker the prior week. The man wearing a taxidermied pig head, Techno, perched at the forefront, the tall man with brown, wavy hair stood at his right side. Techno exuded prespence and power just in the way he held himself, it was terrifying, the way he could command without speaking. Dream and George met him in the middle, standing only a few feet away.

“You go by a variety of names,” Techno began, his words perfectly expressionless, untouched by emotion, “*The man in green, the green death* ... so many titles to describe the same man. You’re an elusive fellow, so unbothered by the fiddle faddle of everyday folk...” he turned his head ever so slightly, the dead pig eyes staring vacantly at George, “Who’s this?”

Not missing a beat, Dream answered, “An associate,”

“Anything else?”

“What does it matter?”

“If your ‘associate’ were to witness, let’s say,” Techno gestured vaguely, “*a disturbing incident* , would he talk?

“He won’t,”

George’s blood ran cold at that, but Dream glanced back at him. It was a gesture so small only George caught it, and it settled his nerves.

“Excellent,” The man held out his right hand, and his right hand man placed a gold-plated double barrel shotgun in it.

“The hell is this for?” Dream snarled, stepping forward while simultaneously pushing George backwards. George’s face flushed when he realized Dream was *safeguarding* him.

“*This* is me letting you know you’re not getting a single penny from me,” Techno drawled, waving his shotgun lazily, before impishly taunting, “At least, not while I’m alive,”

“What’s your point?”

“You and I both know this land isn’t property of the states. Anything goes out here. So whaddya say, why not humor me? We each take ten paces, turn, and fire,” Techno’s taxidermied pig head cocked to the side, and he gestured to the revolver strapped to his side, “Far simpler than poker, isn’t it? Or, you could cut your losses while you’re still above snakes, and walk away without a Boston dollar to your name,”

“And, why is that?”

“I think you’ve been running amuck for far too long, Dream,” Techno droned, “Someone was running the badlands before you, and you need to be reminded of that,”

“Oh, as if you’re one to talk about an unchecked ego,” Dream growled irascible, “I’m guessing the real reason you’re doing all this is because you couldn’t scrape up enough money to pay me like you promised. Is that right?”

Techno’s five cronies looked to each other with embarrassed expressions, but Techno didn’t respond. Dream continued, “Who would’ve guessed investing in a potato farm was a shitty use of your money, especially only for your crops to fail last spring?”

Techno pulled on the forend of his gun, the loading click resounding through the street.

“Let me give you one piece of advice, if you want to play king of the hill,” Techno walked a few paces forward, standing only about a foot away from Dream. His voice was unnervingly still as he said, “This isn’t going to be pleasant for either of us, but it’ll be worse for you,”

“He’s goading you,” George stepped forward, placing a hand on Dream’s shoulder.

Techno’s head snapped to George, “Need your wife to temper you?”

“Leave him out of this,” Dream retaliated, “And leave *me* out of it. I don’t know what kind of game you’re playing, but I don’t give a damn,”

Dream was already turning on his heel as Techno jeered, “You’re running away, just like that?” - Dream didn’t respond as he mounted his horse - “Then the rumors are true. You really have become a coward,”

Those were the last words Dream and George heard before retreating the town.

They rode for a few miles, eventually encountering a rather cosmopolitan city called Tucson. They copped a room at the local inn free of charge - all Dream had to do was walk through the doors, and the employees scurried to appease him, the infamous man in green. Their room in the inn wasn’t anything special; it boasted a few hooks to hang clothes on, there were a few less cockroaches than usual, and there was one bed yet again, which they had the unspoken agreement to share.

“Why didn’t you fight him?”

Dream looked thoughtful for a moment, then answered, “It wasn’t the right time,”

“Is that the only reason?” George leaned against the wall, fiddling with his hands, “Like, if I wasn’t there...” he trailed off.

“I mean, I guess that was a part of it. Like I said, I didn’t want you to get hurt,” Dream said the words casually, like it was so incredibly obvious, but they knocked the wind out of George every time he heard them, without fail. “If things went South, I didn’t know how you’d handle yourself in a shootout,”

“Probably not well,” George smiled weakly, though his words were humorless, “I’ve always been terrible with a revolver,”

“Yeah? I’ll have to give you tips sometime,”

“I’d like that,” George kicked a pebble in the dirt distraitly, “So, what’s next on the agenda? Forgery? Arson?”

Dream rolled his eyes, snorting at George’s remark, “No, actually,”

“Good, I’ve never been fond of fire,”

“I was actually thinking,” Dream’s eyes sparkled wildly with dilated pupils, and George knew he was probably grinning like a madman, “Revenge,”

“On Techno?”

“The one and only,” Dream was unable to contain his laughter as it erupted from his throat in

bursts, “And the best part is, I have a man on the inside,”

Dream proceeded to explain that some of the foreign members of Techno’s entourage lived in a commune together, and that one of those men happened to owe Dream a favor or two.

“I’ll have to get in touch with him soon. But if you don’t wanna stick around for that, then that’s fine,”

“What?” George asked, genuinely confused, “Why wouldn’t I want to stay with you?”

“You want to help me get revenge?” Dream clarified, taken aback, “You want to see this through?”

“Of course,” George replied, “Besides, I’m a foreigner. You’ll probably need my help, especially considering I’m the smart one here,”

Dream snorted at that, fondly jibing, “You’re such a dumbass,”

Before George could fully process what he just agreed to, he was already swaddled in Dream’s embrace, guffawing and cheering with the other man. In celebration, Dream ordered the inn to get them a bottle of their finest wine, and when they received it, they drank themselves to sleep, taking swigs and sharing ideas until they passed out on the floor fully clothed.

George woke up with a bitch of a headache and a crick in his neck, but no regrets.

They scammed the inn out of another bottle of wine, a few cigarettes, and left at noon. Dream visited a man with platinum blonde hair and crisp white clothes, asking him to send word to Dream’s ‘man on the inside.’ A few days later, George met this mysterious man, a lowkey individual named Eret who agreed to help decimate Techno’s monopoly.

Their plan was an elaborate one. It took several weeks to plan, to work out the finer details, to make sure every metaphorical cog in the machine was in place. When it was done, it was perfect - an immaculate recipe for regicide.

During this planning period, George never grew tired of Dream. Sure, they bickered, and Dream had no shortage of annoying habits, yet George never found himself wishing they were apart.

The two of them travelled frequently, never staying in one town for more than a few days. At first, it was exhausting to George to live so ungrounded, but eventually, it became freeing. George was never homesick because, in a way, Dream had become his home.

One night, when the two men were preparing to settle for the night, stowing their horses, George saw Dream’s face.

At some point while riding his horse, Dream’s bandana was swept away by the wind, and he hadn’t noticed until George gasped, staring at him in awe. He had dismounted his horse, looked for his friend, but his eyes landed on the face of a stranger, and it took a few seconds for George to realize that stranger *was* Dream.

“Dream,” George’s voice was barely above a whisper, “Your face,”

George watched as Dream’s expression twisted into one of confusion, then realization as he reached to touch his bandana that wasn’t there.

He smiled softly, chuckling as he said, “I guess it was inevitable, huh?” He scratched the back of his neck, smiling sheepishly, “I was, uh, plannin’ to show you soon, anyway, but I guess I don’t

need to worry about that now, huh?"

George didn't reply, his mouth felt dry, and he was too busy drinking in the details of Dream's visage. The only word George could think to use to describe the other man's features was *strong* : he had sculpted cheekbones, a defined brow bone, and an aquiline nose. A scar spanned across his left cheek, dipping below his jawbone and into his collar. He had two others, one above his lip, and one below his right eye. George noted to ask Dream about them some time.

"Christ, stop starin' at me like that," Dream muttered, covering his mouth with his hand, "You're makin' me nervous,"

"I just didn't expect you to look like that," George responded truthfully.

Dream flinched ever so slightly, laughing skittishly, "Like what?"

"Y'know," George started speaking before he registered what he was saying, "Handsome,"

Even in the dim light, it was apparent Dream was blushing. He snickered diffidently, "You're not too bad yourself,"

"Shut the hell up," George barked under his breath, heart beating against his ribcage violently enough to crack a rib.

That night, Dream didn't cover his face when he slept, and he continued to do so every night after that. While they were in public, Dream wore a bandana, but when it was just the two of them, he was quick to remove it, almost making a point of *not* wearing it around George.

When seeing Dream's face stopped being jarring, it became endearing. It was comforting, in a way, to see how he smiled ever so slightly when something amused him, how his lips quirked and eyebrows knit together when he was thinking. George became so transfixed, it got to the point where he'd grieve a little every time Dream pulled up his bandana.

There were times when George wished he couldn't see Dream's face, more specifically, when he was hurt.

They celebrated with a bonfire the day they defeated Techno. He didn't die, but his reputation was destroyed, a fate so cruel death would've been preferable. He made a fool of himself in front of his most infamous associates, he lost their respect, he lost *everything* , while Dream and George watched and orchestrated.

The fire roared in front of the two men, plumes of smoke spiraling to the heavens as the flames coiled and convulsed. The two men watched, taking swigs from a bottle of bourbon they stole, throwing whatever they could find in their pockets into the fire. The first thing George discarded was his rosary. It was cleansing, to watch the tangible pieces of his past burn.

While rifling for other remotely flammable objects, George came across his long-forgotten sheriff's badge, abandoned at the very bottom of his satchel. He thumbed over the cold plating, too tipsy to discern the stream of emotions overwhelming his senses. The gold seemed a bit more dull now. Maybe George was just bleary-eyed.

He slipped the badge back into his satchel before Dream noticed, and went to look for dry scraps among the dirt. After a few minutes of searching, George returned with an abundance of twigs and tumbleweed branches. He dropped two handfuls of tinder into the ferocious flames.

The fire jumped back at him, and then the flames were cascading over his hands.

George hadn't realized there was alcohol on the cuffs of his duster, and he probably shouldn't have been standing so close, but the damage was done. George managed to put out the fire relatively quickly, furiously beating his hands against his duster. In the brief moment of numbness, he stared at his hands, the remaining skin was purple around the edges, some of it slipping off his hands, and plopping sickeningly onto the dirt below. The flesh underneath was raw, blood prickling on every possible surface.

Then came the agony.

George dropped to his knees, tears pricking the corner of his eyes as he screeched out, the sound guttural and animalistic. Instantaneously, Dream was kneeling at his side, equally as frantic. George knew that, distantly, Dream was saying his name repeatedly, but the words weren't registering properly, they were melting into the crackle of the fire, blending into a dull static.

Dream's harrowed expression was more difficult to look at than the wound itself.

"Goddamn it," George cried blightly, choking back a sob. His lungs felt crinkled and the back of his throat was tight, and *fuck*, he couldn't breathe, not properly. Trembling, he reached for his satchel, retracting his hand sharply on contact. The fabric merely grazing his raw fingertips was excruciating, "Fuck,"

There was nothing else he could say, really.

"Let me help," Dream reached for George's clothed wrists, which he yanked away, "Please, George,"

"I don't want your help," George grit, tears streaming down his face. His heart clenched as Dream flinched at the raw contempt in his voice.

"It's okay to need help,"

"I don't *need* anything," George snarled.

Dream pleaded with the utmost sincerity, "I've dealt with this before, George, *please*,"

Vaguely, George recalled the burn marks Dream had on his shoulder. He never found out where those came from. In fragments, George regained his sensibility. Dying of infection from burn wounds would be unwise. He'd rather kill his ego than himself.

George relinquished, holding out his hands to Dream with averted eyes. He almost screamed again as Dream poured water over George's hands, followed by vodka.

"Remember when you pulled the bullet out of me?" Dream asked softly, wrapping George's hands with strips of soaked fabric, "Just think of this as repayment,"

Technically, tending to Dream's wounds was George's repayment for shooting Dream, but George was too tired to mention this. His body was heavy and his mind limpid, as though his bones were made of lead and his blood of mud.

"You should rest," Dream declared, and offered George a hand, which he scorned, opting to stand up the more inconvenient and painful way.

"Can you ride your horse?"

"I'm *fine* ," George snapped. He bit his tongue, smothering another shriek as he gripped the reins.

They rode east for about half an hour, coming across a town with an inn. Dream kicked down the doors, revolver blazing as he demanded a room. The meek clerk recognized him immediately, and showed them to a room.

"That wasn't necessary," George snipped, but the words had no bite to them.

George kicked off his shoes with ease, shimmied out of his duster with some difficulty, but unbuttoning his vest was a task just short of Sisyphean. The slightest bit of pressure applied to the pads of his fingers sent him into a world of hurt.

Dream picked up on this pretty quickly, noticing that George kept wincing every time he touched a button on his vest.

"Let me?" Dream offered, his hands already on the other man's garments. George glanced up at Dream, and gave a small nod of approval, despite how flustered the gesture made him. Despite not being sexual in nature, there was something suffocatingly intimate about the way Dream silently unbuttoned and removed George's vest, then undid the top few buttons of his shirt.

When George stepped away, his face scarlet, that was the end of it. The two men climbed into the bed and laid on opposite sides, obeying their unspoken rule.

"Tell me if you need anything," Dream said, to which he received no response.

George laid inert, exhausted yet unable to rest because of the buzzing in his brain, as though a beehive was inside his skull. His hands ached and seared, even when they were perfectly still. When he was riding his horse or bickering, he could focus his mind on something else, but now there was nothing to distract himself from the immeasurable pain.

Involuntarily, he let out a sob, not even realizing he was crying. George snapped his jaw shut, doing his best to stifle his weeping, but his breathing grew ragged and he burst into full-body tremors.

"George?" Dream asked, somnolent yet solicitous, "Are you...?"

Mortified, George managed to choke out, "I'm sorry. Please, just ignore me. It's stupid. *I'm* stupid."

Dream shifted in bed, more awake now. "You're not stupid, I promise. Tell me what's wrong,"

George bit the inside of his cheek. "It hurts so fucking bad," he whispered, not turning to face the other man.

Dream was silent, and George was already thinking of what to say next, anticipating to receive vitriol from the other man. He was already imagining what Dream was going to say, 'I've experienced worse' or 'it can't be that bad' or some other dismissive comment. George's heart beat rapidly.

His mind went blank as a pair of strong, warm arms slithered around his waist, Dream's chest pressing against George's back as he curled around George, pulling him close. A surge of comfort washed over George as he adjusted to weight and the warmth of the other man's body.

"I know that this won't take away your pain, but," Dream sighed, and his warm breath ghosted over George's neck, "I hoped it would help?" When he received no response from the other man,

he hurriedly added, "If you don't like it, then, um, I'll-"

"Stay," George swallowed hard. For some inexplicable reason, he needed *this*, and he wasn't ready to lose it. "Please,"

"I will," Dream said like it was a promise, "Don't worry, darlin', I'm not goin' anywhere,"

George let out a shaky breath, "Thank you,"

George woke up several times that night from sheer discomfiture, but Dream was there each time, comforting him, never letting go. George almost felt like he was suffocating, like how your throat constricts when you're about to cry, but despite the circumstance, he wasn't upset. He was so overwhelmed with an emotion he had never felt before, one he couldn't quite put a finger on - an unprecedented fondness, to say the least.

The final time George woke, the sun was streaming in through the dusty window of the inn, and he was alone.

Uneasiness overtook him, and then a sick sort of resignation. Part of him had been expecting this, for Dream to pack up and leave without warning one day. He imagined what it would be like when his fantasy crashed around him, but he hadn't expected it to be in a shitty inn with severe burn wounds on his hands. He assumed there'd be an argument, a dramatic exit, and a messy ending. Maybe he didn't even deserve the catharsis of suffering how he wanted.

George stood from the bed, his hands aching worse than ever, his damp bandages clinging to the raw flesh. George was in the middle of removing them with his teeth, pausing every few seconds to blink back tears, when the door creaked open, and Dream stepped through.

"Oh," He said, his tone oozing with endearment, "I didn't expect you to be awake,"

"Why did you leave?" George blurted.

"I'm sorry, I'll leave a note next time," - *next time?* - "I was getting medicine for your hands,"

"Oh," a pang of guilt shot through George, "Thank you, Dream,"

"Yeah, of course," Dream sat next to George on the bed, "Can I?"

George nodded, holding out his hands. Dream removed the bandages carefully, wincing whenever George hissed in pain as the cloth peeled away from his inflamed flesh. The wounds looked and felt far worse the second day, deposits of fluid had formed under the blistering skin, some of which was falling off in chunks. George's fingernails were purplish black. It was a stomach-churning spectacle.

Dream didn't shy away, though, and proceeded to apply wash George's hands with vodka and water, and then apply the medicine, an herbal remedy that had a cooling effect on the wounds.

They continued this routine for a week and a half, and the inn became something of an asylum to the two men during the convalescent period. George didn't do much of anything, spending most of his days in recovery getting drunk to obviate the urge to tear off his own skin. The hardest part was that Dream wasn't there for most of it - he departed early to deal with his own affairs, leaving a note every time, and returned late at night.

It took time, but George healed, and ultimately he was left with leathery scars and a story to tell. His life with Dream proceeded as usual, if not with more warmth than before. There was a whole

lot more travelling, dancing, laughing, and storytelling. They slept in the same bed every night. They woke up at noon and went to sleep at sunrise. Not once did they go to church. At some point, they celebrated Dream's twentieth birthday. They lied, they cheated, they extorted and stole and broke all the rules George used to uphold, and above all they loved every minute of the beautiful disaster that was their lives.

One night, Dream and George were laying in bed together, enjoying the quietude they so rarely saw amidst the pandemonium of their lives. Dream's arms were entwined around George's waist, a feeling that neither of them ever grew tired of.

"If there's one thing in this world I could choose to never lose," Dream whispered, his voice low and languorous, "It'd be you,"

Maybe Dream only said what he did because he assumed George was asleep. Maybe he wanted George to know. Either way, George never forgot what Dream said that night.

"I love you,"

George didn't say it back. Dream didn't bring it up.

One morning, George was staring at the sky, consumed by the tall grass, with Dream at his side. Something felt off, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. It was like he was searching for a memory on the cusp of his mind.

"I think today's my birthday?" George meant to state, but it came out like a question, "Yeah, I'm twenty-three today,"

"Twenty-three? How the hell are you three years older than me?" Dream teased, good naturedly.

George rolled his eyes, but he was grinning, "That's why I'm more worldly and knowledgeable and handsome than you,"

"You're such an idiot," Dream remarked, getting on his feet and offering a hand to George, "Except for that last part, though. That's true,"

George took Dream's hand and rolled his eyes, not bothering to comment. Their hands lingered for a moment too long.

"What do you wanna do today?"

George raised an eyebrow, "What do you mean?"

"Well, y'know, it's your birthday. We should celebrate," Dream rummaged through his satchel, "We have a lot of money right now, too. We could get a bottle of alcohol, maybe even tobacco" - Dream's face lit up - "We could go out to dinner-"

"Go out to dinner?" George repeated, "Dream, are you trying to court me or something?"

Dream shoved George by the shoulder, "Shut up, you know what I meant, idiot. Seriously though, when's the last time we had a hot meal? We've been living off of dried food for forever,"

"Stop being dramatic, we had dinner at Eret's house, like, a week and a half ago,"

"Come on, this is one of the few towns I'm not wanted in. We can *legally* do shit here!" Dream flashed his puppy eyes, pouting melodramatically, "Why not seize the opportunity?"

“To hell with it,” George concurred, jokingly exasperated, “Sure thing, partner,”

Dream smiled toothily before pulling up his bandana, taking George by the hand, and leading him into town. They ended up doing everything that Dream promised: they bought an exorbitant bottle of bourbon, tobacco and cigarette paper, and they went to a small restaurant. Although their meal wasn't particularly fancy food, it consisted of unseasoned beef stew and a few crackers, it was heartening. Afterwards, they shared the alcohol, not drinking enough to get drunk, but only lightly buzzed.

When the sun began to descend, the two men climbed to the top of the town's water tower, lit their cigarettes, and watched the sun set, the small town splayed against the hues of the sky.

“Aren't you afraid of heights?” George commented absently while taking a drag.

“Doesn't matter,”

The saturated pinks and oranges of the sunset melted into inky darkness peppered with stars. All the warmth that was present minutes ago had dissipated, the gelid air clawing at George through his clothes.

Dream noticed George's shivering and placed a gentle hand on George's waist, pulling him close. George leaned against Dream's shoulder, soaking in his warmth as he rested his head in the crook of Dream's neck. He smelled of tobacco and alcohol, as scent George had come to associate with familiarity.

Dream wrapped his right arm around George and grasped his scarred hand “Your hands are cold,”

Dream didn't move. George didn't either. They smoked in silence for a long minute.

Dream pulled the glove off his left hand and tilted George's chin to look at him, then dropped his cigarette, moving his right hand to cup George's face. Their faces were barely an inch or two apart. George's hand shot to grip Dream's wrist. He let out a stuttered breath.

“Dream,” George said, not sure if it was a warning or a plea.

Dream swallowed hard, his hand trembling ever so slightly. He glanced at George's lips, then met his eyes and asked, “Can I?”

George froze.

Yes.

No.

“I don't know,”

“That's not a yes,”

George bit the inside of his cheek, “I know,”

Dream held their position for a second longer before absconding himself from George, moving away a few inches and taking a long drag from his discarded cigarette. He wouldn't meet the other man's eyes. George's stomach wrenched into a hard knot.

“You're mad at me because I didn't let you kiss me,” George said, and it was a definitive statement, not a question.

"I'm not *mad* at you, I'm just..." Dream ran a hand through his hair. He sounded tired, "Frustrated,"

"You're frustrated because I didn't let you kiss me," George repeated.

"It's not about the kiss, okay? I don't care about that,"

"Then what is *it* about?"

Dream laughed mirthlessly, gazing at George with hurt in his eyes, "Everything. Nothing. What you feel about me, or I guess, what you don't,"

Animalistic panic spiked through George, his fight or flight on the cusp of activation. He scowled, "You don't know anything about how I feel,"

"Yeah, and that's kind of the hard part,"

"Not all of us wear our hearts on our sleeve," George snapped, bitterly reminiscing of the casual 'I love you's Dream had so willingly, so easily told Sylvee. George put out his cigarette. The other man followed suit.

Under his breath, Dream bitterly muttered, "There's a difference between being reserved and being in denial,"

George narrowed his eyes, "I don't like what you're implying,"

"If you've got nothing to hide, then say it,"

"Say *what* , exactly?"

"How you feel," Dream said flatly, before adding, more quietly and softly, "about me,"

"How *I* feel about *you* ?" George echoed incredulously.

"Admit it," Dream paused, and he looked so meek and small. George noted that his hands were shaking. "You're in love with me, George. And I think that's pretty damn obvious,"

George felt as though he had just been slapped straight across the face. Every wall he had so meticulously crafted, so delicately placed around himself was torn down in one fell swoop.

Too close.

With his voice dangerously low, George asked, "You think so?"

"I know so, George,"

Too close.

"I'll tell you how I really, truly feel about you," George shook his head and grit his teeth, "I could never love a self-centered, unhinged, perverted piece of shit like you. I know you would *love* it if I needed you, but I don't, I never have, and I never will. The sooner you get that through your thick fucking skull, the sooner you can stop obsessing over me and dragging me all over the goddamn west, so we can go against everything I ever stood for!" - George paused to catch his breath, his chest rising and falling raggedly, adrenaline thundering in his veins - "And no matter how many times you say those three pretty, little words, I'm *never* going to say them back,"

Dream stood there, mouth pursed into a thin line, eyes wide. Almost inaudibly, he said, “I can’t believe I thought you’d change,”

Then, Dream’s expression shifted, as though a switch flipped inside him. With virulence in his tone, he spat, “Birds of a feather flock together; you’re mouthin’ off about how wicked I am, when we both know you’re just as solipsistic, irresponsible, and ‘perverted’ as me. We’re two peas in the same rotten pod,”

“You forced me into this!”

“You were free to leave any time,”

“Just because I stayed, that doesn’t make me responsible for your perverse delusions about me,”

“*I’m* the deluded one?” Dream looked completely and utterly flabbergasted, almost to the point of amusement, “You don’t think it’s a little suspicious we’ve been sleeping in the same bed for - what, weeks now? Months?”

“You fucking disgust me,”

Immediately afterwards, he opened his mouth to say something, *anything* to mitigate the damage, but before he got the chance, Dream irately added, “I wish I never said those ‘three pretty, little words,’ since you sure as shit didn’t deserve to hear it,”

Something inside George twisted when he heard that.

“I hate you!” George screamed, and he realized he was sobbing violently. He covered his mouth with his hands, *fuck*, he didn’t really want to say that, he didn’t even mean it, but the words were spilling out of his mouth faster than he could think, “I wish I left you there, that night,”

Dream and George shared a look of mutual recognition, the silent acknowledgment of what George meant with the words “that night.”

Dream pulled his bandana over his mouth and stared at George with intense, unreadable eyes. Resigned, he said, “If I had known it’d be like this, I would’ve wanted that, too,”

George stood with a start, making a beeline for the ladder. George was already several pegs down when Dream leaned over the edge and asked, “The hell are you doing?”

“I’m doing what I should’ve done a long time ago,” George looked up at the other man, his silhouette outlined in silver moonlight, “I’m leaving, Dream,”

Dream’s eyes widened at that, but before he could respond, George cut in, “And you can’t stop me,”

When George planted his feet on the solid ground again, he stumbled, not realizing he was shaking. He turned on his heel, walking towards his horse. Dream followed, lagging behind the other man and badgering him all the way.

“Go ahead. Then when you tell Sapnap about this, about *me*. I hope you can’t find one good thing to say. If you’re so hellbent on leaving because you relish the idea of hating me, then go right ahead, *partner*,” Dream spat the last word with acerbity.

Dream watched wordlessly as George mounted his horse, gripping the reins with both hands, not yet flicking them. They sat there, in rancorous silence, both unsure if they were expecting

something from the other man, or nothing at all. They didn't look at each other.

Finally, Dream produced a map from his satchel and handed it to George with a sigh.

"Go East until you come across this huge fissure, you can't miss it. Ride along that, and then some. *Santa Mariana* should be a few miles away," - Dream laughed dryly. A mental image of his crooked grin flashed in George's mind - "You were always terrible at directions,"

George smiled affectionately, not bothering to hide it as he met eyes with Dream for the final time.

"Thanks, bastard,"

With those last words, he fled, riding east, disappearing into the murky blackness of the sky. Dream stood there in silence, watching as the love of his life rode away.

Then, he began to weep profusely.

George was empty on the ride home, all skin and bones with no substance, nothing to show for it. He didn't bother thinking of what to say to Sapnap, he just went through the motions like an automaton.

George knocked on Sapnap's door, and there was shuffling from within, then the flicker of a lantern.

"Who the *hell* -"

He never forgot Sapnap's expression when he opened the door and laid eyes on George for the first time.

Sapnap yanked George in through the doorway, pulling him into a tight embrace. George hugged back just as hard, they were both shaking, both hurting desperately in different ways. One of them gained what he thought he had lost forever, the other was mourning what he could've had for the rest of his life.

"George," Sapnap croaked, "I didn't - I thought you-"

"I know," George cut in, pulling away to look the other man in the eyes, "I'm so sorry,"

It was all he could say.

"George, I don't think you understand," Sapnap said, shaking his head. He left the room for a moment and returned with a single piece of paper. He wordlessly set it on the kitchen table, and gestured for the other man to look.

George looked down at the paper, and the words DEATH CERTIFICATE stared back.

NAME: George Fitzroy

DATE OF BIRTH: November 1, 1857

DATE OF DEATH: May 1, 1880.

"George, I was so worried. We were all worried. You just disappeared without a trace, and your note was so vague and ominous. People started guessin' what happened," Sapnap babbled, but George wasn't listening, "We didn't know what happened, and you had been acting so different

lately, there were rumors that you..." He trailed off, "We couldn't find your body,"

My corpse?

Maybe George really did die last spring - a part of him, at least.

"I was gone for six months," George said inanely, rereading the death certificate over and over again, trying to make sense of the words that got more muddled the more he read, "Half a year,"

"All I had was your note. I took it to the best graphologist I could find, just to make sure you were the person who wrote it. Then, I searched everywhere. I went to every town I could find twice, but at some point..."

"You had to return to your responsibilities," George finished numbly.

Sapnap grimaced and nodded, "And you were declared dead,"

"Jesus Christ," George muttered, cracking under the weight of his revelations, "Was I - did you have a funeral for me?"

"Closed coffin. The whole town showed up,"

George didn't know what to make of it.

After a beat, Sapnap asked "Where were you?"

"I went to a lot of places," George responded vaguely, rubbing the back of his neck. Sapnap eyes widened when he caught a glimpse at the scarred skin of his hands.

"George, your hands-"

"Long story,"

Sapnap opened his mouth like he was going to say something, only to close it again. Finally, he said, "That's fine. You don't have to explain everything right away. We can sort out the legal bullshit later, I'm just so happy you're here, that you're okay,"

He sounded sincere, but it wasn't enough for George.

"Um, Sap?" He fiddled with his hands awkwardly, "Do you remember what you told me? After... after Dream got away,"

Sapnap's face scrunched in confusion at that, not having heard the name Dream in nearly a year. After a moment he said, "Oh. Uh, yeah, I think?"

"Is that still true? Would you still love me if I... if your speculations weren't inaccurate?" George asked bluntly before blabbering on, "Because when I was away, I, uh, met someone. And we spent a lot of time together. This person was incredible. Indescribable, really, and I think... I - I think I was in love with him," George was fighting back tears as he squeaked out the last few words.

Sapnap pulled George into another embrace, holding him as his shoulders shook from weeping so violently. He reassured his friend, saying all the right things while George nodded noncommittally.

None of it felt right, though. He thought coming home would fix everything, he thought telling Sapnap would absolve him of his inner strife. He sobbed into his best friend's embrace, forcing

himself to come to terms with the fact that nothing would be the same.

He was out of excuses.

George went to sleep alone that night for the first time in weeks, haunted by the memory of Dream. He longed for when it was just the two of them, hand in unlovable hand.

End Notes

I decided to really capitalize on the gay fantasy of disappearing without a trace in this one, huh? This is pretty much just Running Away To Go On A Bender With A Mysterious Handsome Man In Arizona: The Manuscript.

First of all, sorry if that final stretch fell flat!! Bitches will watch Bojack Horseman and think they know how to write a nuanced argument (I'm bitches). Honestly i think some of it was kinda needlessly edgy and pretentious, but like, whatever. I wrote it when I was listening to Pathetique Aesthetique by roar on repeat, so I was in a mood. Hopefully some other edgy pedantics can vibe with it B)

BTW I made up George's last name cuz I thought it'd be kinda weird to use his real one. If Dream reveals his ~real name~ in part 3, I'll make up a last name for him as well.

The title is from No Children by The Mountain Goats, which I listened to on repeat while writing this. Some of the dialogue was inspired by It Was You by Rare Americans. Both of these songs are on my dteam cowboy au playlist (which you can listen to here: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4l11PagiySzIa36HLwzQRk?si=Z_aW_nOqR5eMdU__COFxMg)

FINALLY, I hate to be *that* guy, but I put a lot of time and hard work into this fic! If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving kudos and some kind words, especially if you're interested in ~part three~ (the finale)! Feel free to chatter at me over on my tumblr, @wormweeb !!

Works inspired by this [one](#), [Always My Darlin'](#) by [pizzacrusthoe](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!